



Op-Ed: The Romance of Great Powers in Northeast Asia

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The Strategic Setting

Northeast Asia is a place where five of the world's most powerful nations meet: China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the United States. Three of these countries have the world's largest economies (the U.S., China, and Japan), and three of them have the largest militaries (China, the U.S., and Russia). In political terms, the United States, Japan, and South Korea are champions of democracy; China is the largest authoritarian nation; and Russia is a bizarre mix of half-baked democracy and half-revived authoritarian rule.

The five great powers are strange bedfellows. The United States, Japan, and South Korea are connected by democratic values and military alliances. China and Russia are strategic partners of convenience. All five great powers have been enemies of one another in the past. Although common interests at times dictate that they must cooperate, the five powers nevertheless follow their own national interests to pursue their goals.

Conflict of interest is natural; but compromise concerning national interest is difficult. A prime example is the “romance” with North Korea by the five powers during the past decade. Although their goals were the same — trying to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons — they nonetheless brought different interests to the on-again and off-again Six-Party Talks that have accomplished nothing.

The North Korea problem, ironically, has been a good thing for the five great powers. After all, it offered them a common problem and forced them to cooperate to a large extent.

New Quarrels Over Old Disputes

But recently, a long-time divisive issue among the five powers has resurfaced to drive them apart. It is the issue of Japan's maritime territorial disputes with Russia, South Korea, and China. The United States was involved in the events which created aspects of the disputes and has had a stake in these disagreements from the beginning.

The disputes have almost intractable historical claims and contemporary circumstances; but none of the disputes has a fair or attainable resolution in sight. Recent flare-ups have only further complicated the relations between the five great powers. While a full presentation of the disputes is beyond the scope of this analysis, the following opinion provides an update on their current status.

- **The Russo-Japanese Dispute.** This dispute is over the four islands at the southern tip of Russia's Kuril Island chain — the Northern Territories in Japanese terms. The islands are only a few miles off Japan's northern prefecture of Hokkaido. Russia took hold of these islands at the end of World War II as part of the spoils of the great power post-war settlement and has maintained effective control ever since. Japan, however, claims sovereignty over these islands and has pressed for their return since the end of the war. This dispute has been a major obstacle in Japan's relations with the Soviet Union and its successor, Russia. The United States supports Japan's claim over the islands and the efforts for their return, but declines to extend the protections of the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty to include these islands, declaring that they are not under Japan's effective administration. Russia has indicated several times that it would return two of the smaller islands to Japan in exchange for Japanese aid and other benefits. However, Japan insists that the four islands must be returned together. Russia's position has taken a hostile turn in the past year with two visits to the islands by Dmitry Medvedev, in November 2011 as Russia President, and in July 2012 as Prime Minister. These visits infuriated the Japanese, and subsequently, conflict between Japan and Russia has intensified. Signs of compromise have essentially disappeared.

- **The South Korean-Japanese Dispute.** This dispute is over a group of small islands in the middle of the sea between Japan and South Korea. The two nations have their own names for the islands and the sea: “Takeshima” in the “Sea of Japan” and “Dokdo” in the “East Sea,” respectively. South Korea has maintained effective control over these islands since the early 1950s. Japan has

maintained its sovereign claim all along. The dispute has regularly caused nationalistic and diplomatic frictions between the two nations. On August 10, 2012, South Korea President Lee Myung-bak made a historic visit to Dokdo. This visit set off a storm of diplomatic spats between Japan and South Korea. The United States is torn between its two long-time allies and asks them to “work it out peacefully.”

- The Sino-Japanese Dispute. This dispute concerns a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, known as the "Senkaku Islands" in Japanese and "Diaoyu Islands" in Chinese. Japan took hold of these islands in 1895 in the name of *terra nullius* (Latin: no man's land) and again in 1972 from the United States as part of the Okinawa Reversion Treaty between the U.S. and Japan. Both China and Taiwan claim sovereignty over the islands. Over the years, the Chinese peoples of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the mainland have made repeated attempts to break the Japanese control of the islands. The clash came to a head in 2010 over the collision of a Chinese fishing trawler and two Japanese Coast Guard patrol boats in the disputed waters around the islands. The incident and its aftermath, to include Japan's efforts to put the Chinese fishermen on trial, set off a nationalistic and diplomatic firestorm between the two nations. Fast forwarding to the present, the current point of contention is over the Japanese government's decision to purchase the islands from a private Japanese owner, thus reinforcing the status of the islands as an integral part of Japan. Not unexpectedly, China has responded with anger. The United States takes no position on the territorial dispute, but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has made it clear of late that the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty covers those islands because they are under effective Japanese administration. If China were to use force against Japan to change the status of these islands, the United States would be obligated to come to Japan's defense.

Winners and Losers

Russia is clearly a big winner in these disputes. By making presidential visits to the disputed islands, Russia has reaffirmed the legitimacy of its hold on the territory. In addition, Russia has secured China's support for its position. Shortly before his visit to the disputed islands, the Russian President was in China to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the end of World War II. In the joint statement between Dmitry Medvedev and Hu Jintao, the two heads of state praised Russian and Chinese sacrifices during World War II, denounced unspecified attempts to alter the history of World War II and the key documents concerning post-war agreements, and vowed to preserve the hard-earned victory. This message is clearly directed toward Japan and the United States. In

joining hands with China, Russia has also expanded its reach to East Asia. The two partners of convenience will also try to counterbalance the U.S. strategic and military shift, which rebalances the attention of the United States toward Asia.

The runner-up in these disputes is South Korea. By making a presidential visit to Dokdo, South Korea has reinforced its effective control of the disputed islands. The aftermath of this presidential visit resulted in hostile exchanges with Japan, whereby South Korea made it clear that this particular dispute is a part of its unsettled historical problem with Japan; and reaffirmed South Korea's position, that in this case, there is no room for compromise.

Unfortunately, Japan is the big loser in this great power game. Japan has not produced an adequate response to either the Russian or Korean actions. Japan's efforts to "nationalize" the Senkaku Islands have met with an increasingly negative reaction from China. It is clearly difficult for Japan to see that there is no apparent recourse to historical events, the weight of which is obstructing Japan's relations with the other Asian nations every step of the way.

China is arguably a loser in these disputes as well. In their own terms, the Chinese say that they have lost their cool on the maritime disputes; especially so with Japan. There are deep-seated reasons for this lack of composure. For one, like South Korea, China frames the dispute with Japan as part of the unsettled historical problem. It is a test case for revenge as well as for primacy between the two East Asian giants. The Chinese government characterizes Japan's move as the most blatant challenge to Chinese sovereignty since the end of World War II; warns Japan not to play with fire; and promises to take all measures necessary, including the use of force to settle the contest. China understands that its fight with Japan is also a conflict with the United States. In order to counterbalance the U.S.-Japan alliance, not just over the territorial dispute with Japan, but also from the pressure of the U.S. strategic shift and military rebalancing toward the Asia Pacific, China has brought Russia into its strategic calculations. With support from Russia, China had no qualms giving U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton a cold reception in Beijing (September 4-6, 2012), and told the United States to stay out of China's territorial disputes. By their own admission, the Chinese are showing their true colors. All countries with a stake in the Asia-Pacific region are no doubt carefully watching.

The United States is not happy to see Japan's setbacks. It feels "uncomfortable" (State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland's term) that its strong ties with Japan and South Korea are not enough to help the two countries bury the hatchet. More frustratingly, the United States is

unhappy with Russia's advance in East Asia and the Russo-Chinese coalition. But the main concern of the United States is the explosive dispute between China and Japan. There appears to be no room for compromise. An eventual showdown may be only a matter of time. The United States is attempting to keep the situation in balance at this point. However, the continued success of the United States to do so rests on its ability to remain a major player in the region. Some believe that this power is declining.

The romance of the great powers in East Asia is taking a toll on the welfare of the region. The first victim was the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Russia's Far Eastern city of Vladivostok (September 7-8). Nothing significant was accomplished in this year's meeting. For example, Secretary of State Clinton had to use the forum to address the disputes among the great powers. Prior to her arrival at APEC, Secretary Clinton was hopeful that the Pacific would be big enough for the United States and China (the Secretary's remarks at the Pacific Islands Forum, Cook Islands, August 31, 2012). However, in light of Russia's "strategic shift to Asia," the Russo-Chinese coalition, and frustrated with the great power disputes, the Secretary appeared to have second thoughts, whereby a five-way "romance" has become more of a challenge than may have been originally envisioned.

The second and more alarming consequence of this intensified great power struggle is the impact that it will have on the region's security and stability. While the dispute between South Korea and Japan is not likely to escalate to armed conflict, the disputes involving Russia and China have significant military implications. Russia has recently reinforced its military deployment in its Far East front and China commissioned its first aircraft carrier in September 2012. In the meantime, the clashes between China and Japan over their disputed islands have already escalated from collisions of small fishing boats to bigger-tonnage patrol vessel standoffs (Chinese ocean administration vessels vs. Japanese Coast Guard ships). The Chinese navy has even sent warships to patrol the troubled waters. The United States has accordingly taken conflict-prevention measures by calling on China to scale down the confrontations and, by conducting aircraft carrier-centered military exercises in the Western Pacific to demonstrate U.S. power-projection capability.

These "titanic moves" are likely to cause the great powers to reconsider their security policies. There will be repercussions in the greater Asia Pacific region as well. Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia — the nations that have territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea — are taking measures to upgrade their defense capabilities. The Asia Pacific region, which has been renowned for decades due to the relentless pursuit of economic development and the preference

for peace by its member nations, is now compelled to devote more attention to these security concerns. To maintain peace and stability in this region, which are vital U.S. interests, the United States should intensify its strategic rebalancing toward the Asia Pacific. While the United States should employ all of its elements of national power, the U.S. military will unquestionably bear the brunt of this foreign policy burden. Specifically, the U.S. Army, along with the Pacific Command, should intensify its theater security cooperation and engagement programs with all the key actors in this region and, increase military-to-military exchange programs with the Chinese military in particular. An effective engagement supported by a strong U.S. military commitment is the ultimate guarantee for peace and stability in this region.

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